



Sen. Sanders) Third Annual
State of the Union
Essay Contest

WINNERS

1st Place – Caroline Braun, Champlain Valley Union High School

2nd Place – Emily Ellsworth, Colchester High School

3rd Place – Gena Chiola, Mt. Abraham Union High School

FINALISTS

(listed alphabetically by last name)

Sydney Alderman, Mt. Abraham Union High School

Annie Arthur, Woodstock Union High School

Jeannine Bissonette, Champlain Valley Union High School

Jonah Blatt, Milton High School

Tyler Bradley, South Burlington High School

Cally Braun, Champlain Valley Union High School

Allie Bull, Champlain Valley Union High School

Gena Chiola, Mount Abraham Union High School

Emma Davitt, Champlain Valley Union High School

Taryn Druge, Champlain Valley Union High School

Emily Ellsworth, Colchester High School

Riley Forbes, Mt. Abraham Union H.S.

Damon Fulcher, South Royalton High School

Benjamin Gilbert, Milton High School

Liam Hayes, Vergennes Union High

Christie Kershaw, South Burlington High School

Sonia Lowen, Champlain Valley Union High School

Alexandra McFarland, Woodstock Union High School

Rachel Moore, South Royalton Middle/High School

Derryk O'Grady, Milton High School

Saleban Olow, Winooski High School

Robert Pennypacker, St. Johnsbury Academy

Rebecca Potter, Brattleboro Union High School

Austin Price, Mt. Anthony Union High School

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1st Place
Cally Braun
Champlain Valley Union High School
11th Grade
ESSAY 204

"There is no simple cure for the abundant issues plaguing our nation. Not only are we recovering from a recession, but we also are confronting challenges related to climate change, healthcare, and education. While our efforts to address these issues are noble, our failure to solve them reflects a more concerning societal problem.

On December 14, 2012, twenty children and six faculty members were fatally shot in Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Not only did this devastating tragedy leave close friends, family, and the local community in shock, but also the nation. Though it is remarkable that our country embraced the friends and families of those killed, we only seem to value such a strong sense of community after a crisis. The dramatic increase in violence in the past decade raises new questions about our current societal values and priorities: have we forgotten what's truly important in this new age? While we enjoy the many luxuries that accompany technology and contemporary life, has the lure of modern convenience eclipsed our fundamental human need to take care of and support each other, our families, and our communities?

Perhaps it is time we recalibrate who we are and who we want to be as a country so that the fundamental values on which our country was founded can once again flourish. How can one pursue happiness without access to basic healthcare, food, or the ability to spend time with the ones we love? Certainly when our forefathers declared our right to bear arms, their intent was not for corporations and special interest groups to profit from its citizens being armed with assault weapons intended for war. Instead of unbridled greed and big business dominating our economy, it is imperative we support small businesses so they can thrive once again. Environmentally, we have yet to replace our dependence on oil with renewable energy resources and reduce our effects on climate change. And while we all agree educating our children is a requisite investment in our future, teachers continue to earn, on average, 12 percent less than other workers with similar education and work experience.

As a world leader and role model for democracy and peace, we need initiatives that not only connect people and communities, but also ones that will act as catalysts for change. Increasing awareness of issues related to social justice will spark larger movements for societal change, whether it be reducing community violence, practicing business ethics, implementing renewable energy sources, advocating for mental health care, or investing in our teachers and schools. Instead of businesses and special interest groups being the sole influence on policies and the direction of our country, now is the time, once again, for all citizens to be heard, cared for, and respected. Although as a nation we have and continue to make advances that were inconceivable just a century ago, our penchant for the new shouldn't trump our commitment to older values and fundamental human rights."

2nd Place
Emily Ellsworth
Colchester High School
11th
ESSAY 284

Social mobility is essential to the development of the American character. The ability to overcome class distinctions and succeed economically through hard work equates to opportunity. Yet current U.S. taxation policies are harming the middle-class and widening the gaps of income inequality, thus narrowing the window of opportunity for Americans. Federally enforced legislature such as the Bush Tax Cuts and the income tax on capital gains provide a disproportionate amount of benefits to the wealthiest Americans. This leaves a majority of citizens possessing less means to increase their income, obtain education for higher paying occupations and provisions for the next generation.

It is necessary to consider the purchasing function and the insurance function of wealth. The quality of a child's education and neighborhood is dependent upon the volume of wealth the parent has access to. Children also receive a very different set of choices and opportunities upon entering the adult world, depending on their family's economic status. To combat the further detriment to future generations, taxes must be raised in areas which will inflict minimal harm, and produce the most beneficial results. America is experiencing the largest disproportion of wealth since 1928, and current taxation policy not only aids in widening the income gap, but harms the accumulation of government tax revenue.

The sale of stocks and bonds are called Capital Gains. Until the 1990's, the Capital Gains Tax was 28%. Today its current level is 15% which enables less revenue gained from any individuals whose main source of income comes from stocks and bonds, such as wealthy businessmen. In 2006, for instance, Warren Buffett paid 17.7 percent in taxes on the \$46 million he booked that year, while his secretary paid 30 percent of her \$60,000 salary to the government. Simple practices such as restoring tax rates to past levels are essential to the aid of our country's recovery and to improve the state of the Union.

3rd Place
Gena Chiola
Mount Abraham Union High School
9th
ESSAY 263

Today, we face problems concerning the environment, war and conflict, as well as lack of resources. In these times, more than ever before, the solution to these problems lies in global communication. If we put our heads together, and help each other we can create a plan to reduce climate change. If we increase our efforts to work out conflicts between countries, through effective communication, less people will lose their lives through unnecessary wars. Sharing of resources can occur when we effectively communicate between countries, which will reduce poverty worldwide. All it takes is effective global communication to resolve global issues.

One major global problem is conflict between nations. There will always be conflicts between people, it is part of being human, but how we deal with these conflicts is what makes the difference. Today, approximately 60 countries are involved in a war. Millions of people die each year from these conflicts. This fighting and killing is indeed a form of communication, but it is not effective in solving world problems. We accomplish nothing by killing people. We need to stop thinking of ourselves as being separated by national boundaries and focus on how to break down these walls. By communicating and working towards the same common goal, we will improve the planet. If we think globally, we will have more of a chance of communicating globally, and resolving conflicts through peaceful means, rather than war.

Enter Climate Change conundrum. Climate Change is the increased temperature of the atmosphere due to human carbon emissions. Our use of gasoline to run cars, and oil to heat our homes contributes to the heating of the climate. We are slowly destroying our environment, and creating an increasingly dangerous habitat for all living thing. It is no question that this is a dangerous issue, that needs addressing. And in order to address it, we must work together. Bill McKibben, of Vermont, helps us do this. He organized 350.org, which is a global campaign to, solve climate change. The mission of 350.org is "building a global grassroots movement to solve the climate crisis." He organizes global rallies and projects to bring the world together in the face of this crisis. He helps us communicate as a world to get the job done, since it can be done no other way.

Lack of resources needs to be addressed and solved through global communication. 25,000 people die from hunger everyday. Other poverty induced diseases, like AIDs, cause millions of deaths worldwide. However, by globally communicating, we can reduce poverty. Global communication can help us redistribute the resources. Some places are brimming over with resources, such as fresh food, water, and technology, while others suffer. The U.S.A has an abundance of resources. If we use global communication to be at peace with one another, we can share what we have, so that less people suffer. If the United States were to share resources with poverty stricken countries of Africa, people in Africa would have happier lives, while people in the United States would still have enough to live comfortably. This can all be achieved through effective global communication.

Global communication is the answer. If we all put our hearts and heads together, and forget our

differences, we can change the world for the better, which is always the ultimate goal. Whether it's to prevent wars, bring the temperature of the atmosphere down, or to redistribute resources, its undebatable that communication is what we need. Let us come together, and work together and never forget the importance of global communication.

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Sydney Alderman
Mt. Abraham Union High School
9th
ESSAY 259

Today we often face the problem of excessive violence between people, starvation, and economic problems. People aren't all getting what they need and something needs to be done. What would fix everything, broaden our universal communications skills and get things done quicker would be to unite globally. By working as an entire unit we can all communicate and work toward the same goal we all crave: peace. Uniting globally can solve conflicts causing violence, starvation, and economic problems.

Uniting globally will benefit the people of the world immensely. By uniting globally it would be much easier to distribute the necessary resources to sustain everyone, such as food, water, and energy. When everyone is on the same page and communicating thoroughly between territories, you can maintain fair trade and further discuss what laws and human rights need to be established as well. When we're all united for a common goal, let's assume peace amongst all people, discussion is more productive and conclusive and proper action can be taken at a faster pace. Actions such as feeding and bringing water to those who have none, and also getting the area with these conditions re-established for suitable living conditions. Everyone benefits from a united world.

The U.S. Economy will be heavily benefitted by uniting globally. When we unite globally, trade is faster and we can simply work faster because communication is quicker and more conclusive than when we're all thinking separately. Trade will therefore be quicker and we can be more productive about it with such open communication. It would be easier to discuss the distribution of currency amongst countries and people and how we can fix the current economical problems. Uniting globally will solve the biggest problems of the world. It will broaden the communication between territories and will help us resolve conflicts causing famine, violence, and economic problems universally. When we all band together we can accomplish anything and finally bring a new era of peace.

Tyler Bradley
South Burlington High School
12th
ESSAY 122

Our country needs to invest in clean sustainable energy and decrease our dependence for oil from other nations. Our nation should be investing in wind and solar power. Wind is a renewable source of energy, which will last forever. It does not pollute our environment and is all natural. Solar energy also provides us with clean energy, with no combustion. It too is renewable and causes no green house gases. Although wind and solar, as energy sources, may prove to be expensive, it is a small price to pay for the health and safety of our environment. In contrast, we are eventually going to run out of oil and the high cost of transporting oil and our dependency on other nations needs to be eliminated.

We need to stop relying on foreign nations for our energy supply. If foreign governments continue to control oil profits they can use that money to fund terrorism mischief. In addition, these energy rich countries can restrict the oil supply and therefore make the United States a hostage to their demands. We need to end this cycle and invest in more sustainable energy sources.

We need Congress to work harder to obtain sustainable energy tax incentives like the Investment Tax Credit and Production Tax Credits. These credits will help reduce the cost of wind and solar projects and in the long run help reduce global warming. All across our earth we currently see record heat waves, melting glaciers, rising sea levels and extreme droughts and floods. The United States must lead the world in reversing global warming, to preserve a safe planet for our children and grandchildren.

Annie Arthur
Woodstock Union High School
11th Grade
ESSAY 184

To be a democracy, our country must be able to hear the voices of every citizen individually and the population as a whole. People all over the world are sacrificing their lives for the hope of the right to vote. In the United States, eligibility is simple. To vote, one must be a citizen of the United States and be 18 or older. However, a country as great as ours does not seem able to succeed in a very seemingly simple task: vote freely. The State of our Union is teetering on the edge.

In the 2012 Presidential Election, only 57.5% of the entire eligible population cast their ballots. About 93 million citizens did not participate in this most basic foundation of democracy. How is the United States supposed to run as an effective democracy if so many citizens remain silent in such a crucial time to make their voices heard? Granted, part of this lack of voting is caused by laziness, indifference or belief that one vote will not change the outcome. However, there are many citizens who want to vote but restrictions imposed at the state level have either attempted or succeeded to suppress participation in this election. In this recent election there were laws passed to hinder voter participation by making it difficult to register to vote, requiring voter photo identifications, miscommunication of date and times, and threatening voters with imprisonment for voter fraud. Officials also succeeded in cutting early voting periods, voting by mail, polling hours and number of locations. Even though courts temporarily struck down many of these efforts, there is no reason to believe that state officials will be deterred from imposing more voting restrictions in the future.

This national issue should not be determined at state level. Restriction on voting is a federal problem and should be addressed by federal powers. This is too important an issue to leave to individual state governments as clearly demonstrated by the blatant attempts to deny citizens their right to vote. The solution is to simply create basic standards on voting. The federal government could pass a bill with minimum guidelines for states to follow on voting laws. This legislation does not need to be a complex list of restrictions; this bill would be freeing up voting laws by listing only what needs to happen to achieve successful voting. Each state would then have the freedom to expand on these basic requirements. This bill could facilitate registration, polling hours and ability to mail in votes. It is an American's right to be able to vote. As the world's greatest democracy, no political party should be able to obstruct voting. The United States, a nation for the people of the people by the people needs to set a better example as the standard bearer of democracy."

Jeannine Bissonette
Champlain Valley Union High School
11th
ESSAY 143

Ever since Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1913, it has been a tradition for Presidents to address the nation with their State of the Union report. As President Obama prepares to present his State of the Union address, many politically concerned citizens begin to ponder the thoughts of what will be produced in the next four years.

With a current national unemployment rate of 7.9%, the numbers appear to be much lower than the 10% that the United States endured during October of 2009. Although these rates suggest a recuperating recession, they have not yet reached a level in which the nation can sit back comfortably. These high unemployment rates understandably result in a greater necessity for more families to reach out to social welfare services such as food stamps and local food shelves. According to a local press interview with food shelf coordinator Mary Ann Castimore, the Vergennes Congregational Church found themselves serving a total of approximately fifty to sixty new families. People are struggling to find and hold steady jobs; feeding their families continues to be growing concern.

Corresponding with the current economy, the United States could certainly do more to address the concerns of the young people. With the lack of vacant positions in the working world, young adults are learning quickly that it does not matter so much what they've majored in, but what is available. As a high school student of Vermont, I have become increasingly aware of my school advisor's push for me to look into which fields are in need of laborers, rather than those that suit me best when determining an occupation. As the pursuit for jobs lengthens, it is important that the government restricts outsourcing jobs to other countries and create said jobs within the nation. Instead of outsourcing jobs, the United States should provide incentives to retain these positions in America.

As the United States adapts to the most severe recession since the Great Depression, the American citizens' fear of a failing economy is justified. Major issues such as the nearing fiscal cliff, or changes in social security are becoming more common parts of American conversation. As January approaches, politicians in D.C. are running out to time to make the decision of who will be taxed in the coming years. By taxing Americans making over two hundred and fifty-thousand dollars, more taxes can be gleaned by the federal government. Additionally, more citizens being taxed results in more equitable terms. As a federal insurance program, Social Security is praised highly for the benefits it provides the retired population. Since American citizens are now living into their eighties, a shortage in social security money has materialized. The inadequacy of funds has lead to an extended retirement age which is predicted to continue increasing into the future. The United States must continue to raise the retirement age in order for Social Security to continue operating. It takes time and multiple strategies to solve any major issue: there is no one perfect solution.

Jonah Blatt
Milton High School
12th
EUUC[212

Good Evening America,

There are several issues that need to be addressed here tonight that will benefit our nation in one way or another. First off, I'd like to touch on the topic of Unemployment. The Unemployment rate has dropped significantly. The rate was 10% in November of 2009 which was the highest from January 1st 2009 to January 1st 2013. In the middle of that, the rate bounced up and down between 9 to 9.5 from 2010 to 2011. Now here we sit today on a continuous steady decline all the way down to 7.7 and I assure you it is not over. Jobs were being created at 151,000 per month in 2012 and we look to raise that number this coming year. My new plan allows workers who have lost their job to be placed on temporary jobs as trainees for short periods to retain their skills or gain new ones while still receiving benefits. This was released on April 19th where the unemployment rate was 8.2. and now it is 7.7. its working America.

Cannabis, or better known as Marijuana has become a major topic of discussion these days in America. Is it a medical miracle or an addiction amongst many? The Office of National Drug Control Policy and I have stated that we oppose the legalization of marijuana and other drugs since legalization would increase the availability and use of other illegal drugs. Theses legalization would bring more health and safety risks closer to your homes. The legalization and selling of marijuana could bring some positive to our attention. A potential boost for the economy if it was sold and taxed heavily. However in the end I strongly oppose the legalization process and it should only remain available for medical use only. The risks strongly out weigh the positives.

Over 50 years ago we created a strong, close relationship with Israel. We have done joint military planning along with military research and weapons development. We have continuously assisted Israel with 3.1 billion in security assistance and I will not be the president to stop that trend. The only way for Israel to achieve peace with their neighbors is to begin with a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel. They are also a big export consumer to our economy. We must stand by our ally through these tough times between them and the Palestinians. We will look to both sides to find a common ground to install peace back into the world between these rival nations. I am in support of resumption of the aid to the Palestinian government with a condition that the government renounce terrorism. Israel has a right to defend themselves from these Palestinian rocket attacks, but we will look to peace first in order to draw this to an end. Israel is an important Allie in all perspectives. We must help them.

Thank you and good night America.

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Allie Bull
Champlain Valley Union High School
11th Grade
EUUC[117

The United States of America is known as the land of profuse opportunity for all who come here. Throughout the history of this country, there have been events to be proud of and events that were not too glorious. As the world prepares for the new year of 2013, it is a good idea to reflect as we explore the state of this union, and gain insight into how this country is running.

Congress is seemingly dysfunctional right now. The current congress has passed the least number of bills in history. This statistic is shocking and embarrassing. The system of checks and balances within our Democracy is designed to prevent an abuse of power. It is also a known fact that our system takes longer to pass bills and get things done; however, the current state of gridlock is not okay. The nation is frustrated with the leaders and the lack of compromise in Washington. Congress needs to become a leader of the whole nation, and not individual leaders of each political party. The wall between each party needs to be let down and national issues need to be addressed. It is hard for congressmen to make decisions that could affect reelection; yet, the lack of progress being made is not making the constituents any happier. It is better for these leaders to leave the nation stronger and prosperous than when they arrived, as opposed to an unchanged, struggling country.

In the shadow of the Sandy Hook Massacre, gun-control debates have resurfaced. This is a topic that needs to be addressed, swiftly and promptly. Semi-automatic weapons are completely and utterly unnecessary in the United States of America. There is no reason that a person should need or desire to own one. These weapons are killing machines and should be banned. Americans have the right to bear arms, but there is no need for weapons other than hunting weapons. Any weapons that do remain legal in this country need to be regulated and controlled with very thorough background checks. However, the fact that semi-automatic weapons are available isn't the only cause of these tragedies. Hollywood portrays gun violence as exciting and desirable. That, in combination with violent video games, leave imprints in the brains of impressionable young people (including the mentally ill). Semi-automatic weapons should be banned, and violence movies and games should be regulated. In this country there is freedom of speech and expression, but the production of these movies and games results in harm to other citizens. All of these factors need to be addressed. Politicians who agree with this stance need to step up and speak out despite the possible damage to their reelection. The safety of the people should be more important than reelection.

America is a bright and prosperous place. There are a few issues dragging it down, but with the known strength of this nation, these problems can be solved. The only way to fix big problems is to lay down political barriers and work together, hand-in-hand.

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Emma Davitt
Champlain Valley Union High School
11th
ESSAY 180

The current state of our Union is multifaceted, filled with diverse opinions and numerous obstacles. Our Union faces an interesting future ahead, either a prosperous and promising future, or a destructive and deleterious future. It is up to us, the people of the United States, to do everything we can to ensure a brilliant future, to promise fortuitous and successful lives for our succeeding generations.

We are currently coping with the most intense, severe recession in our country since the Great Depression. 7.9% of the people in the United States are out of work, struggling to find jobs and earn a living. Detrimental taxes are traumatizing families, college graduates' degrees are rarely helping them secure jobs and, throughout these unfortunate situations, many Americans are still focusing on abortions and gay marriage rights. It is time for our nation to accept individuality, embrace the freedom our country was founded upon, and fix the major problems facing the people of the United States of America.

The unemployment rate is uncomfortably high. In 2008, many businesses closed, numerous workers were laid off and the unemployment rate began to rise. As a result, jobs have become more valuable, and at a time where few were comfortable with their living situations and current bank accounts, taxes rose. To address this situation, taxes must be lowered for the lower and middle-class families while returning the economy to a peaceful state, encouraging businesses to grow and expand in the United States.

The economy is not only effecting the working class of our nation, but also the children - the future. If children watch their parents and older siblings with college degrees struggle to find a job, what will make them want to go to college? What will convince them that attending college is a wonderful and beneficial experience? The young members of our national community will one day be responsible for our country and our only option to ensure a bright and promising future is to nurture, teach and help this younger generation. With this in mind, it should be of great importance to the United States to make college education more affordable for the young population. Through grants, aid and scholarships, many more students will have the opportunities to attend universities, and with an economy on the mend, we can look to the future with great hope in the highly educated body that will one day run the country.

Contemplating these issues, our Union has a lot to focus on. We have run ourselves into a deep economic and educational rut and it is our job to work together to climb out of it. The future of our country rests solely in the hands of the upcoming generation, however, how can we have faith in the subsequent decades if our current society struggles to find jobs and attend college? The answer is rather simple, the young people of our country have the chance to make groundbreaking decisions and be amazing leaders, if given the opportunities.

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Taryn Druge
Champlain Valley Union High School
12th
EUUC[118

In an idealistic world we would work for a common good. Countries wouldn't consider money, land, or rivalry they would only see how they could create peace and maintain it. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "A point has been reached where the peoples of the Americas must take cognizance of growing ill-will, of marked trends toward aggression, of increasing armaments, of shortening tempers--a situation which has in it many of the elements that lead to the tragedy of general war.... Peace is threatened by those who seek selfish power."

It is my opinion that in this world we are not driven by the ambition for peace but instead by the ambition for wealth and power. We the U.S are no different, as much as we would love to believe otherwise and see ourselves as the peace bearers of the world, we must open our eyes to the truth. Wealth and power must be relevant in our dealings with foreign nations because these are some of the only factors that will drive negotiation.

An example of the struggle for wealth and power is the United States relationship with China. Currently, the U.S is deeply uneasy about China who we are deeply indebted to and whom is our greatest supplier of goods. It is frightening to think that China's withdrawal could destroy our entire economy, yet our withdrawal from China would cripple them as well. Instead of the dependence creating unity among our nations, it has created discomfort and hostility. The power complex each country has, creates the belief that dependence upon one another weakens us. When Thomas Jefferson said, "Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition." Jefferson could never foresee that U.S dependence would extend overseas due to our economies desire to manufacture cheaper and thus more profitable products.

China and the U.S are two great superpowers and each just as self-destructive as the other. Without a strong and desirable alliance with China, the U.S becomes weakened to possible foreign attacks and a collapse of the economy. The U.S is feeling out of balance right now, so many goods are being manufactured overseas at the expense of U.S jobs being taken away. This balance could be found when the U.S comes to the realization that we cannot completely isolate China; and at the same time we must create a political environment that nurtures U.S businesses that manufacture products domestically.

In an ideal world the bonds and alliances of countries would surpass the separation of race, religion, class and culture. We must work towards this ideal world, because in it we will find a far better future we could not possibly foresee today.

Riley Forbes
Mt. Abraham Union H.S.
9th
EUUC[273

The most important issue for the government to solve today is human rights.

Everybody deserves equal opportunities in life. The State and Federal Government should help to make sure that everyone is free from torture, has the right to adequate food, clothing and housing, and has the right to health care. The most significant issue for the government to solve today is human rights.

Human rights are the basic rights that everyone who is human has. Human rights are important for everyone in the world to have. An important right is the right to have basic items, adequate clothing, food and housing. The United Nations has a right that gives everyone the basic items that they need, (clothing, food and housing). Where as the United States does not have a right giving everyone basic supplies that is needed to live. "A man in India without access to clean water dies of a treatable disease." (Pinheiro) Everyone deserves adequate clothing, food, water and housing, but the problem is that these things are limited. There are homeless shelters and water, but there may not be enough for everyone. The Government should try to help provide people with the basic needs that are needed to survive.

The government should act to protect all people from torture. The United Nations and the United States believe that people should have the right to be safe from torture. A guard watches as a man is assaulted by an inmate in a jail Texas. (Pinheiro) This man gets assaulted and the guard does nothing. The Guard is watching, he should help to protect the people and not let them suffer even though they are in jail. The Government should pay attention and try to help people feel free and safe from torture.

In order for everyone to get a long life people need to have their basic needs. The United Nations and the United States do not have any kind of right that says that everyone should have healthcare, or be able to have health care. Obamacare will allow more people health insurance that they can afford, (Marston). People who couldn't afford health care before now have a health care that is more affordable. The Government is helping to provide people the access to an affordable health insurance.

The Government should help to support the people and their rights.

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Damon Fulcher
South Royalton High School
12th
ESSAY 210

The state of the Union is the most difficult to decipher in years. We, as a nation, are stuck in a time where the war in Afghanistan is dwindling, and we're trying to climb out of an abysmal fiscal pit. In a nation that has made its name for moving forward, controversies over human rights like the right to marry and the right to have an abortion are still as prevalent as ever. However, all is not lost, and this great nation will continue to forge on, despite these set backs.

The land of the free still does not grant rights to every group of people. Gay marriage is one of the most hotly debated subjects in our country right now. Even though our Constitution states that all men are created equal, we as a nation do not always abide by this principle. Half of the American population is brushing a group of people under the rug, just because they have a different sexual orientation than themselves. The most recent example of this is North Carolina amending its state constitution to say that same-sex couples do not have the right to marry. This act takes the issue to a whole new level past legality. However, not all is bad. Several more states have begun adding to the pool where same-sex couples have the right to marry. The United States' highest court is taking on a case concerning a California proposition to ban gay marriage. This case will decide the fate of the issue in the years to come. Unfortunately, the most serious issue our country faces is not even marriage equality.

The most pressing issue currently is the economy. The great debate is whose taxes should be cut, and whose taxes should be raised. The nation is greatly divided along partisan lines in this respect. These opinions are exemplified by our current President Barack Obama and our Speaker of the House John Boehner. One believes that taxes should be raised on the wealthy and cut on the middle class and the other vice versa. This is the nation's problem. We simply need to get over which party we are a part of, and work toward a common goal. There is guaranteed success if all of congress works together to move forward.

The current state of the Union is complex, containing many positives and negatives. With the idea in mind that working together is necessary for the betterment of this nation, the President and Congress will move forward and fix the dilemmas that this country faces.

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Benjamin Gilbert
Milton High School
12th Grade
ESSAY 211

This country faces one of the most important stages of change and development it has ever seen. The decisions we make as a nation in the next few years will shape not only the future of our own lives, but the lives of every citizen of this world. We won't be able to do this unless we come together. We are humans. It is in our nature to disagree. We are a democracy. It is a democracy's nature to disagree. Disagreement is a sign of a thriving democracy. It is also in our nature to solve problems, to be civil, to be fair, to provide for a better tomorrow.

In the coming years, we need more doctors and researchers, to finally find a cure for cancer. We need more books to inspire. We need more businesspeople to meet to the new age markets. We need teachers, and lawyers. We need successful young people to inherit this country. However, this will not be possible with the rising costs of higher education. The cost of sending a child to college is the highest it has ever been. If we as a country decide not to act, we cannot hope to make a better tomorrow for ourselves or for our children. In a state of economic turmoil, cuts have to be made. The military has been allowed to spend almost without limit. The funds that will keep Americans safe and soldiers well equipped should not be touched, but the endless spending must stop. Anything that is not absolutely vital and necessary for the safety, protection, and justice of the American people ought to be reevaluated.

Since its foundation, America has been the birthplace for equality. From George Washington fighting against the oppression of a monarchy, to Martin Luther King working towards a more civil existence, Alice Paul screaming for the right to vote. Each step has helped open the door to equality. Each day we are tested, and each day we must answer history's call to change. Gay men and women have been quieted for centuries. But their time is here. No federal ban on love will stop the dawn of equality that is breaking upon this nation. This is not about Republicans or Democrats, religions, or politics, but about American people who love and cherish one another.

We have a broken system. Today, it is far too difficult to receive mental health care. It is easier to get your hands on an assault weapon than visit a doctor. We have seen in the past decade that this inequality leads to a tragic and horrific reality. Assault weapons are made for the military, and should be reserved exclusively for that purpose. Most importantly, those in need of mental healthcare should have access to it. We must forget about the politics and money, and focus on the lives of Americans who are in danger everyday.

I have high hopes for the future of this country. We are all different. We are often very divided. However, we are strongest when we stand together."

Liam Hayes
Vergennes Union High
10th
ESSAY 130

Today our country is facing many problems that require the attention of not only the leaders in Washington, but the American people as well. As a teenager I believe the two most important issues are unemployment and our education system. I know that these issues are affecting our country the most mainly in its overall growth.

First, I feel that our unemployment rate is quite unacceptable. However, in the past year it has been lowering slowly by the month. Although it may seem like a substantial amount, the area of the nation I live in continues to struggle to find jobs for students graduating college and for people retraining to new careers. I believe to continue this progress over the coming years America needs to look at the national picture of what jobs are there, what new jobs could serve a need for products and industry and what skills these new industries will require Americans to have.

Lastly, I think that when it comes to education in this great nation the statistics and rankings don't lie. In math, science, and writing, the US is in the lower half when compared to other nations. If you look at statistics, compared to others, we are a more developed country. I am sure there are many things that we can do as a country to climb higher in the tables. I truly think that if there wasn't a long summer break, and there were one or two week breaks frequently throughout the course of the year to take place of the large summer break. I think this would help because the long summer break leaves ridiculous amounts of time to forget everything you have learned in the school year. I also think that Americans have requirements for a second spoken language and to promote challenging classes throughout our schooling experience. If education is truly the key to our future, it needs to give us not only the basics, but the skills to problem-solve, create and be the architects of America's new future.

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Christie Kershaw
South Burlington High School
12th
ESSAY CK3

I believe our nation has shown much improvement over the past year. Job growth rates have been increasing and businesses have been getting back on their feet after an economic low point. Even with these developments, there are many more aspects that need to be addressed and improved. I believe that as a country, the biggest issues we should be focusing on are improving the state of our environment and making college more affordable for students.

In my opinion, our government isn't taking the issue of global climate change as seriously as it should be. We are no longer able to turn our backs on this difficult issue because we are already starting to see signs of its negative impacts on us. With major droughts this summer in the Midwest and powerful storms like superstorm Sandy, it's clear to see that our climate is becoming more unpredictable and deadly, and the root cause of this is from climate change. There haven't been enough major moves put into effect by our government to combat this issue and I believe that both political parties should work closer together to come to an agreement on how to do this. There should be tighter regulations on the amount of greenhouse gases factories can emit, higher miles per gallon standards for new cars, and more money put into the development of renewable energy sources.

In order to make advancements in the field of green energy to slow down climate change, there must be scientists who are able to do the work. But we may soon be seeing a decrease in the number of these people because increasing costs for post-secondary education make it difficult for those who want to pursue a career in the sciences, or any other field, to do so. In order to ensure that our country will have enough highly educated citizens to help bring our nation closer to solving our energy crisis, we need to make college more affordable for everyone. Universities must lower their tuition costs and have more scholarships and grants for a wide range of students. If our government made loans easier to get with lower interest rates, this would also help remedy this problem. This particular issue is especially important to me because as I start my college career in less than a year I will be spending a lot of time worrying about how I will be able to pay for my education. Many other students feel the same way as me and some may have to postpone their plans for higher education. A decrease in college-educated citizens is not what our country needs right now.

These two issues of climate change and post-secondary education affordability are to me the most important on the list of many our country is facing. If both political parties work together, they will be able to resolve these issues in the near future.

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Sonia Lowen
Champlain Valley Union High School
11th
ESSAY 182

The United States of America is the most powerful nation in the entire world but it's currently facing severe issues. The financial crash of 2008 resulted in the most disastrous economy since the 1930's Great Recession. Climate change is creating extreme weather disasters and destroying nature. Not to mention that there is more income inequality in present day than ever before. These are only a select few because the list of issues goes on. The good news is that solutions are accessible but the bad news is that as long as corporate lobbyists continue to corrupt legislators, they will never be reached. The United States Congress needs to stop allowing corporate corruption.

The American economy is beginning to show signs of recovery but it still has a long way to go. Millions are out of a job and the government has a \$16 trillion debt hovering over their heads. The end of this recession is not going to come fast but there are provisions that will begin to facilitate it such as raising taxes not only on the rich but on the corporations as well. This will cause more of their money to go towards helping the government rather than manipulating it.

America is not the only place being affected by climate change but that does not, in any way, constitute sitting back and hoping someone else will fix it. The United States makes up 2% of the world's population yet they use 25% of the world's resources. The environment's safety is dependent on Congress to create new laws that will further regulate manufacturers to reduce harmful emissions. America's economy and climate would prosper greatly if they invested time and money into green energy. Unfortunately, automobile and other corporate lobbyists refuse to let that happen because they can make more money manufacturing oil-powered products.

Corporate lobbying has corrupted what the Constitution deems as the most powerful branch of government. Much of the legislation that is passed is beneficial to industries, whereas much of the legislation that would be beneficial to the general population is rejected. The corporations have gained this unhealthy amount of power by guaranteeing members of Congress a [future] job in the private sector in exchange for legislation that will favor whichever industry and/or corporation they represent. It is a gross injustice of congressional power.

The United States of America is at a fork in the road, they can either choose to take a step in the right direction and work for the interests of the people or they can take a leap in the wrong direction and work in the interests of corporations. The country's future prosperity will be a result of that decision. It is crucial that the government abolishes corporate lobbying and strives to serve the people this nation was built for. This will not be easy but it is critical in the process of rebuilding America.

Alexandra McFarland
Woodstock Union High School
11th Grade
EUUC[151

"As we have seen throughout our country over the past few years, climate change is greatly affecting weather patterns. In 2011 Vermont was hit by Hurricane Irene which devastated much of the state and resulted in destroyed roads and homeless families. In 2012 Hurricane Sandy came ashore in New Jersey and New York changing even more of our fellow Americans' lives with massive destruction. Last year snowfall here in the Green Mountains was nearly half of the annual average. This year we have already seen two major snowstorms and snow levels are already approaching and surpassing the total snowfall of last year. We have to be concerned with these extreme weather changes. Weird weather may now be normal weather and scientists predict such patterns only worsening in the future unless we take action.

Climate change is a great problem that the United States, although on the surface has attempted to tackle, needs to face head on. We need to once again be world leaders. Our first step is to launch a nationwide campaign, as there remains a huge portion of the population who still believe climate change is simply a myth, to help folks understand the complex science. Second, our nation needs to support scientific research and publicize new discoveries that could help to better our understanding of the climate change crisis as well as create and implement new green technologies to combat it. We need to establish a national plan to reduce our energy use.

The 350 Initiative, started by environmental activist Bill McKibben, is a great goal for our nation to strive toward. Through awareness and education programs that will lead us to conserve as well as the development of new and innovative green technologies, we will reduce atmospheric carbon levels to a more sustainable level of 350 parts per million by the year 2050. Scientists have shown that 350 is a safe upper limit for the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. The 350 plan puts a solid number that we can strive to achieve on a concept that so often feels much too great to tackle.

As one of the largest economies and one of the largest consumers of fossil fuels, we should be a leader in changing the way people around the globe think about our climate. It's not simply here for us to use at will. It's here for us to take care of and preserve for generations to come. These are feats that our country has the resources, the will power and the ingenuity to tackle.

We will not sit back and watch as extreme weather washes over our great nation. As we have in the past, we will face our worst problems and we will overcome them."

Rachel' Moore
South Royalton Middle/High School
9th
ESSAY 232

My family is like most families in Vermont; middle class citizens. Both my parents work to pay taxes and to put meals on the table for my two brothers and me. Sometimes barely getting by is all we can do. Life is not what it used to be. When it is time for taxes to be paid for, it is always the hardest, but we skim by. Taxes are killers to lower and middle classed citizens. I think the government should address this problem in full detail. It is time to be fair and to put the money back into the economy. In my opinion, when the President gives his State of the Union speech, he should promise to raise taxes for the rich and lower them for the poor.

Lower class citizens pay taxes like everyone else. The difference between them and higher classes is their income. Lower class citizens do not receive a lot of income. Therefore they have a harder time supporting their families. There is a reason why so many people are losing their homes. And most of those people are lower class citizens. When the President makes his State of the Union address, he, in my opinion, should promise to raise taxes on the rich and lower them for the poor. It is not fair that lower class people work twice as hard to keep their home, and to pay for food, when higher-class citizens do not have to work as hard and they do not need to worry. Lower class citizens are not the only ones who suffer from taxes.

Middle class citizens also suffer from taxes. They have to work harder to support their families than the higher class. Being a part of the middle class group, I have experienced the effects taxes have on our lives. Sometimes skimming by is all my family is capable of doing. I have sat at the table watching my mom write out and pay all her bills. I frequently wish that I were rich, so I could support all my family members and to get them to a better state. But wishing has not done much for me, so I gave up. But now I have turned my head to the President and his colleagues. Maybe my plea can be heard by them, to lower taxes on the poor and raise it on the rich. I want to live an American dream, not just dream it. The more you raise taxes on the lower class, which is the majority of Americans, the less money will go back into the economy. Tax the people who can spare an extra dollar, not the people who depend on that dollar for a meal.

In my opinion, taxes should be raised on the rich and lowered for the poor. Lower and middle classes have a hard time supporting their families because of taxes. What about that American dream people talk so much about. How will future generations be able to live that dream if they can not even buy a house. It is time to do something, so, in my opinion, when the President makes his State of the Union address he should promise to lower taxes on the poor and raise them to the rich.

Derryk O'Grady
Milton High School
12th
ESSAY 248

My fellow Americans, we need to remember the tragic events that occurred in Newtown, Connecticut, change in gun control laws must happen. Unfortunate events like this can separate weak countries and divide them, but we are different. A tragic incident like this makes us more aware and stronger. As we move forward, we will use this as a learning experience to make this country safer by decreasing the ability to own a gun.

In addition to gun control, the following are other major topics of concern. First, we are in major national debt. Second, unemployment rates are reaching an unbearable high. Third we need to use more green energy and save more of the worlds oil. Lastly, the cost of the education is incredibly high and still increasing. We must find solutions to these issues and I believe I can do it.

We need to better our international relationships. We need to stop involving ourselves in wars. Wars are a heavy burden and over the past twelve years we spent \$3.7 trillion and by the end, possibly \$4.4 trillion. This money does not need to be spent. We need to take care of our own business, impose higher taxes on the wealthy, and save money from wars.

More jobs need to be created for our country. The national unemployment rate is around 7.7%. and in 2010 we reached 9.8%. A steady decline has to continue to happen. The more people in this country working, the more revenue we can bring. This will help chip away at the debt because the more people working making money, the more money they can spend. This series of working, making money, and putting it back into the economy is what we need to create a surplus.

America's oil dependency is on a slight decrease since president Obama took office. We have limited the use of other countries oil by depending more on ourselves and this saves money. We need to find more ways of using renewable energy such as wind power, solar power, and hydro power: fossil fuel is not everlasting, while renewable energy is.

We tell high school students that they need to go to college to reach success, but then we throw them in debt. The prices for college are astronomically high and continue to increase. The average price for an in-state student is \$22,000 a year. How many students can afford to spend \$88,000? The answer is easy: not many. We need to find a standard price range for colleges to work with.

As we grow as a nation, I promise we will find answers. Our nation can overcome any challenge. Nothing bring this country down. We will keep fighting these battles until we have reached our goals. Thank you and may god bless you all.

Salebani Olow
Winooski High School
Grade: TBD
ESSAY: S.0.14

Dear President Obama, Senator Sanders, and Fellow Americans,

From the birth of America, to America today, the driving force and the heart of America has always been the American Success Story. The United States of America is a country of opportunity and accomplishment. We believe in our country and our government. We believe that we will eventually succeed, overcoming any obstacles that we face. Our government and the entrepreneurs creating jobs made our country the best among the world, but new issues have appeared from the unemployment rate to the cost of college tuition to gun control. These are what we need to address.

Perhaps the biggest problem we face as a nation is the current rate of unemployment. According to the "Department of Numbers" during the November of 2012, the unemployment rate is down to 7.7 percent of people in the United States. This means that over 12 million Americans are jobless, including my mom. Many American families are losing their jobs because companies obtain their jobs. Companies and wealthy people are getting richer and those from the middle class and poverty levels are falling toward and below the poverty line. This is particularly true given the fact that the dollar is not worth what it was in the past. As a result, inflation is boosting up the price of all goods and services. As unemployment has been rising, the cost of education is increasing. Today, American colleges have imposed an extraordinary increase in tuition. Additionally, there are also issues such as Gay Rights, Social Security, illegal immigration and the War on Terror.

In spite of these factors, many students in the United States look for higher education after high school. They want to go to college and have a good career. If the government's influence results in increasing college costs, then students like "ME" will not be able to afford college. The average family cannot fully support their child's tuition costs. Our parents' incomes are spent paying for college debt. While many college graduates remain jobless, they still must face debts of more than 90K dollars. For our newly hatching generation, I believe that college tuition should be cheaper for everyone no matter what economic level the family is.

Regarding another critical issue, each year thousands of Americans lose their lives through gun related problems. Guns are designed to kill people easily and many lives are lost each year because the United States doesn't have strict gun control laws. The deadly massacre shooting at a Connecticut elementary school was heartbreaking. The outcome of this tragedy resulted in the deaths of 20 children and 6 adults, a painful scenario. Beautiful little kids between the ages of 4 and 9 years were slaughtered. It is my strong opinion that the government should pass a gun law that would reduce gun problems. President Obama and fellow lawmakers, I feel you need to be creative and figure out a better way to ensure young kids' safety, by choosing you, United State is going in the right direction for a better future.

In conclusion, the challenges that we face with unemployment, college tuition and gun control are ones that we must currently address. We must make significant changes in order to progress. The success of our nation must be made by building upon our society. As in the past, we can and always will work hard and make America and the world a better place.

God bless the United States of America.

Robert Pennypacker
St. Johnsbury Academy
12th
ESSAY: RP2

This year's Tax Rate for the richest are the Lowest this Country has ever seen!

Today's tax rate means that person making \$379,150 pays the same tax as a person making seven million dollars. Thirty years ago this was different. In 1981 there were 16 tax brackets. Today there are six. The highest tax bracket for today's federal income tax is 35 % for a person making \$379,150 or more. That means you're taxing a small business owner the same rate as a giant corporation president like General Electric's Chairmen and CEO Jeffrey Immelt who has a salary of 3.3 million dollars as of 2011.

If and when the tax rate increases for the rich like many Americans want, it will not hurt the economy like the GOP is stating. Last September, the Congressional Research Service published a report countering Republican claims that lowering top tax rates would lead, or had led, to higher economic growth. "Changes over the past 65 years in the top marginal rate and the top capital gains tax rate do not appear correlated with economic growth," the report concluded. Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell responded by having the report suppressed, but its findings were incontrovertible (general-electric-ceo). This shows that with the rise in taxes for the upper class it will not affect the economy like many Republicans are stating.

Also we are at war with the Taliban and yet we still have lower taxes than ever before. How are we paying to support this war? Never before has the United States had lower taxes during a war. In 1943, during WWII, the tax rate for a person making \$2,593,984 (adjusted for inflation) was 88%. In that same year a person making \$155,000 (adjusted for inflation) was 38%. Vietnam War, in 1966 the tax rate for a person making \$629,530 (adjusted for inflation) was 70 %. Also in that same year a person making \$83,104 (adjusted for inflation) was 36%. Today's tax rate, as of 2011, for a person making 379,150 is 35 %. A person making 1.1 million dollars tax rate pay the same 35 %. (Federal income tax history).

Should a person making 379,150 pay the same rate as multi- millionaire? No they shouldn't. Why do we have the lowest taxes ever in the United State and yet be in a war? The United States should have taxes similar to years before. The middle class should pay the same rate. The rates for the middle class have stayed within the same percentage for the last 70 years. Meanwhile the upper class has gone from a 90 percent tax rate in the 1940's and 50's to 70 percent from 1960's through 1981, and 50 percent in 1982 through 1986. Now they have a 35 percent tax rate which is the same as a middle class citizen. The United States should raise the taxes of the rich.

Rebecca Potter
Brattleboro Union High School
12th
ESSAY 146

Congress is dysfunctional because of priority discrepancies. Some in our government seem to believe that holds, filibusters, and less legal tactics of delay and obstruction serve as necessary means to a greater GOP-dominated end. Others argue that while disagreement is key in a true democracy, so is compromise. Certain members of the Senate, where unanimous consent remains relevant in the scheduling and timing of legislation, stand by “holding” the Senate’s progress on a bill or committee action. Others point out that this is 2012, where a hold in Senate exists as a euphemism for indefinite or permanent vetoes, often done in secret. In both houses, many forget that the true party holding the majority in Congress are the white, heterosexual, wealthy men.

While Congress’ dysfunctionality directly correlates with the partisan gridlock we’ve been witnessing over the past four years, this has more to do with flaws in the system itself rather than the puppets within it. Sure, people are selfish and want the connections voting a certain way or hiring a specific set of hands will bring--but what ingenious economic system provides the impetus for such action? Capitalism, at the root of it all, enables members of Congress and the wealthy holding the strings above them to exist as money-motivated figures of power. Privatization of education, healthcare, and human services create the legislative standstill we’ve got in Congress, which dedicates an absurd amount of time to arguing over non-issues in a partisan lock. This allows legislation that matters often gets nixed in committee or shoved through without necessary debate.

Capitalist society has created a dysfunctional Congress, and until we fix the system we will keep getting the same results. The band-aid for this infectious situation is compromise in the Senate and House of Representatives--impending compromise, I predict, what with a certain cliff looming over our heads. Antibiotics for a more permanent change would mean a re-evaluation of everything we’ve grown up being told was “American”: federalized elections, spending limits on campaigns, socialized care for humans and our unalienable rights (health, education, safety), and public ownership of the land of the free.

Austin Price
Mt. Anthony Union High School
11th Grade

ESSAY 161

My fellow Americans,

Our country is evolving and changing in ways it has never before. We can either adjust or get left in the past. America was once the greatest power in the world and I believe we can get back to that, but we must take hold and lead with force. Although we are on the path back, we still need to focus on our military, economy, and civil rights.

Our military is the backbone of our success as a nation. With over nine hundred military bases internationally, we need our military to be strong as ever to protect our trading partners as well as us. The necessary changes that must be made are to increase our presence in the countries that are filled with enemies of the state and looking to do harm to the United States and its citizens. We must increase the spending budget for the military so that we will maintain our internationally renowned army. We as a country have the responsibility to not only protect our rights, but to protect the civil rights of others who don't have the ability themselves.

Further, we are in one of the greatest recessions since the Great Depression; we face unprecedented challenges as a nation to get back on top. If any country can come out of a depression and be even stronger than before, it is America, the home of the brave. Were the spending in any sector to increase, then there would be a huge influx of jobs that were created by all that new money. A higher tax rate for the wealthiest of Americans will help this nation get out of the greatest debt it has ever been in. It is time for everyone to pay their fair share. Although the taxes do need to be increased, increasing the taxes on small business owners will only hurt our economy because they will hire fewer workers.

There is also a great civil rights issue that must be addressed in our country. This is the marriage of homosexuals. I am proud to say that the state I reside in has done what few others states are brave enough to do by creating Civil Unions. There are a shocking forty-one states that ban same-sex marriage compared to only nine that allow it. I am asking for an immediate legalization of same-sex marriage in all states, similar to that of the segregation laws of the sixties and seventies.

If we as a nation are to be prosperous, we must grow and adapt to the world around us. In order to reach our goals there will have to be sacrifices made by every American. We must make changes to the economy, military, and civil rights in order to reach our lofty goals and reap the benefits of our hard work. "